

# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose of the Plan

The Takoma Central District Plan is the product of a community-driven planning process for the Takoma neighborhood commercial district of Washington, DC. The plan defines near and mid-term strategies for revitalization and articulates broad development goals, urban design guidelines and priority actions necessary to encourage and facilitate reinvestment in the district. Key objectives for the plan include:

- To define and clearly articulate Takoma Central District Revitalization Goals.
- To serve as a predictable development guide that provides the community with a framework to assess the compatibility of new development in the district.
- To provide guidance and advice to potential developers or future businesses in their decision-making.
- To promote a consistent and integrated planning and design approach to the commercial and mixed-use areas of Takoma for the benefit of the entire neighborhood.
- To reinforce development and revitalization initiatives that are based on smart growth principles for transit oriented development and improved quality of life.
- To create a process that encourages citizen participation and embraces the principles of the Mayor's Neighborhood Action Initiative.

The Takoma Central District Plan presents a unique opportunity for Takoma residents, businesses and institutions to join with their City government and development professionals to renew their community. The plan provides a practical blueprint for a community-oriented, mixed-use district - a place for commerce, for living, for fun.

## Organization of the Plan

Founded in the community vision, the Takoma Central District Plan is organized around several critical revitalization components that frame significant issues and strategies for renewal of the area. These include historic preservation, market economics, land use, transportation and

urban design. Following introductory information describing the planning process, community background, and citizen vision and goals, individual report sections provide detailed assessments and revitalization strategies for each of the five critical components. An Illustrative Revitalization Scenario is then presented to help visualize how a renewed Takoma Central District may develop based on the plan's recommended revitalization strategies. The plan document concludes with a summary implementation plan for the recommended revitalization strategies.

## Partners & Process

The Takoma Central District Plan is a collaborative effort between the District of Columbia, Takoma citizens and businesses, and a consultant planning and design team led by the SmithGroup of Washington, DC.

### ***A Community Partnership***

- *Takoma Central District Citizens Working Group*  
ANCs 4B01 & 4B02  
Historic Takoma  
Gateway Coalition  
Plan Takoma  
Takoma United  
Citizen & Business Representatives
- *The Honorable Adrian Fenty, Ward 4 Council Member*
- *District of Columbia Office of Planning*
- *Consultant Team*  
SmithGroup, Inc. - *land use & urban design*  
Gorove/Slade Associates - *transportation*  
Economic Research Associates - *economic analysis*  
EHT Traceries - *historic preservation*

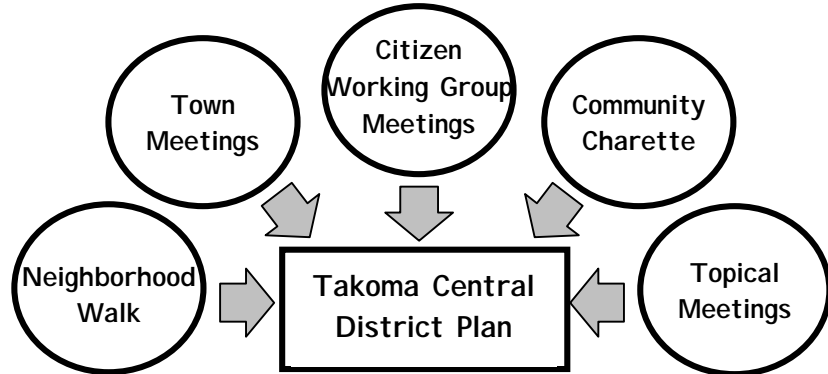


Neighborhood Walk – August 30, 2000

To facilitate direct citizen involvement in the planning process, the Takoma Central District Plan Citizens Working Group was organized at the beginning of the planning process to help coordinate, develop and review the plan. The Citizens Working Group includes a cross-section of both District of Columbia and Maryland residents and business owners from the Takoma Central District and the surrounding neighborhood, each representing a broader constituency from the community.

The project partners began their work together in August 2000 and continued over an eight-month period. The process for developing the Takoma Central District Plan began with a neighborhood assessment and

community goal setting, followed by a series of public town meetings, Citizen Working Group meetings, neighborhood walk, community design charette and topical meetings that enabled community stakeholders to discuss areas of particular concern and opportunity.



The initial plan development process with the community ended with a public town meeting and a Citizen Working Group meeting in January 2001. DC Office of Planning staff and the SmithGroup consultant team then worked through Summer 2001 to develop a draft Final Report document based on the concepts and strategies identified during the public process and input from appropriate government agencies. The Draft Final Report was released on September 27, 2001 and the community was briefed on its contents and the process for submitting comments at a Citizen Working Group meeting on October 1, 2001. Citizen comments regarding the report were heard at a public meeting on October 29, 2001 and a 30-day period for written comments ended on October 31, 2001.

Over 265 specific suggestions were received from more than 45 citizens during the review and comment period. These suggestions were reviewed in consultation with Office of Planning staff, the SmithGroup consulting team, appropriate District of Columbia agencies, and the City of Takoma Park and Montgomery County, Maryland. The citizen input resulted in significant revisions to both the substance and organization of this Final Report document. A Public Hearing Record and Executive Summary of these citizen comments and the Office of Planning's response to this input will be prepared separately as required by the District of Columbia's Small Area Plan legislation.

## Place & Possibilities

The Takoma Central District represents the heart of the Takoma neighborhood, located in the northeast corner of Ward 4 of the District of Columbia. The Takoma Central District Plan study area boundaries are generally defined by Chestnut Street to the north, Eastern Avenue and

the DC/MD boundary to the east, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Streets to the west, and Aspen and Laurel Streets to the south (see [Figure A](#)).

**Figure A**  
**Project Boundaries**

Takoma Central District project boundaries are defined by the area between Chestnut Street to the north, Eastern Avenue to the east, 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> Streets to the west, and Aspen & Laurel Streets to the south.



The Takoma neighborhood is one of Washington, DC's most distinctive communities. In 1883, Takoma, DC was part of the Takoma Park community, established as a bucolic 100-acre, inter-jurisdictional, commuter suburb centered on the former Baltimore & Ohio Railroad station (formerly located just south of the current Takoma Metro station) and straddling the DC-Maryland border, far away from Washington's central city. The suburb's livelihood depended upon the conveyance of its goods and its people via the train line. Today, Takoma, DC is one of twenty-five neighborhood historic districts within the greatly enlarged central city, yet a similar focus on transportation continues to define much about the community's current condition and future development.

Takoma shares its history and its name with Takoma Park, Maryland. Both seamlessly embody classic pedestrian-scale streets, a mixture of well preserved, low to moderate density Victorian, Queen Anne and Bungalow style homes, as well as more modern housing types, and a diverse and active citizenry. Most notably, the area's principle neighborhood business district along Carroll Street links the DC and Maryland portions of the community. While a drive or walk along Carroll



Carroll St. retail in Old  
Town Takoma Park, MD



4<sup>th</sup> Street retail

Street from DC toward Laurel Street in Maryland presents no obviously defined border, Takoma, DC's public streetscape and quality and mix of retail uses lack the identity and vitality of the Maryland side. Neither Carroll Street or nearby 4th Street in DC have developed the critical mass of retail, commercial and housing that their Maryland neighbor enjoys, despite being anchored by the most heavily used pedestrian Metro transit station in the District of Columbia.

Many Takoma, DC residents find themselves shopping for basic goods and services across the border, even though their own commercial district has significant capacity to offer many of the same retail and service amenities. Similarly, daily Metro commuters enjoy few opportunities to shop in Takoma, DC and generally only pass through the business district on their way to and from the station. Inadequate parking accessibility and a lack of diverse and quality retail businesses contribute to the diminished potential of the area. Nonetheless, opportunities for revitalization are present, as many properties along Carroll Street and 4th Street are either underutilized or have become available for new development altogether.

Over the last twenty years, at least two planning studies have analyzed and made recommendations about overcoming the revitalization issues faced by the commercial district. A 1977 plan was developed in anticipation of the Metro station opening. In 1999, Takoma Park, MD and the Takoma, DC community partnered to outline strategies for improved linkages between the inter-jurisdictional commercial district. At the time of the development of those plans, however, the District of Columbia's economy was not in a position to support substantial public or private investment. Despite the opening of the Takoma Metro station and proximity to Downtown DC, few improvements were realized.

With the start of the new century, DC's overall economy is considerably stronger. As a result, the DC government is currently in a better position to respond and be an active participant in the revitalization of the city's neighborhoods. Simultaneously, DC's population is increasing, with new home starts and renovations reaching record levels over the last few years. Residents are reinvesting in their homes and their neighborhoods. Others are recognizing the advantages of central city living. DC's government is committed to retaining current residents and continuing to increase its resident base as part of the city's economic renaissance. At the neighborhood scale, population growth and new opportunities for housing are critical components of strengthening the local economy and restoring the city's urban fabric and heritage.

Neighborhoods like Takoma are beginning to feel the effects of economic growth in the city. Positioned around the city's most heavily used pedestrian Metro station with developable land surrounding it, the

Takoma Central District is well-positioned to realize some of its revitalization goals in the very near term. While the goals of previous planning efforts to protect the small-scale, residential character of Takoma are still valid, large new institutional tenants (such as the Washington Opera), increased vehicular commuter traffic through the area, and proposed private development projects slated for up to 140 units of housing and neighborhood-serving commercial uses suggest that Takoma is destined for change.

The present condition of the economy therefore requires an immediate, broader, more proactive revitalization strategy: one that leverages current market opportunities to foster positive change for the benefit of the entire community. However, the community is also very aware that if new development and the population it brings are not considered in a manner that is compatible with its surroundings, the changes will not contribute to the health and vitality of the neighborhood.

## Vision & Goals

The desire for positive change and improvements to the Takoma Central District is strong within the Takoma community. Citizens who participated in the planning process agreed on many of the issues most in need of attention. These issues, which were defined and presented at a public meeting early in the process, include:

### *Market Economics & Land Use*

- Improve neighborhood retail along Carroll Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Street.
- Remove/redevelop vacant buildings, empty lots and industrial areas that have a negative impact on the community.
- Add more infill housing of a scale that is compatible to the existing architectural character of the area.

### *Transportation & Public Services*

- Improve the intersection of Cedar Street, Blair Road and 4<sup>th</sup> Street.
- Provide adequate parking for retail users and residents.
- Mitigate commuter traffic to protect neighborhoods.
- Improve street maintenance, trash removal and code enforcement.

### *Urban Design*

- Improve and upgrade Metro open space area.
- Improve Metro underpass and entrance; add amenities such as kiosks, bicycle parking, etc.
- Improve pedestrian environment, access, safety and quality of streetscape, especially along Blair Road and to and from Metro.

Opinions differ as to exactly how and to what degree Takoma should change to address these issues. However, through the initial kick-off town meeting, the neighborhood walk, the community design charrette,



the Citizen Working Group meetings, and other public town meetings, citizens developed a clear vision for the Central District's future.

## Vision for the Future

Takoma's vision begins with the goal of strengthening the identity of the area's commercial district as a vibrant "town center" for residents of the surrounding neighborhood. Citizens debated the ways in which this goal could be realized, placing significant values and priorities on those community assets that already contribute to the area's identity. Top among these assets is the Metro station and the open space area that separates the station's surface parking lots from the adjacent residential community. There are varying points of view among residents about the preferred design and use of this space, ranging from a green buffer zone to a public park to mixed-use commercial and housing development. However, there is general agreement that this site marks a key "gateway" into the community and as such should be enhanced to contribute to the identity of the adjacent commercial district.



Signature open space

It is from this Metro gateway site that much of the core vision for Takoma is derived. Residents envision a village-scale, mixed-use commercial district for Takoma, drawing inspiration and guidance from the area's historic character and architecture, and anchored by a high quality, signature open space at the Metro station that defines the town center. The existing historic buildings within the district are revitalized with quality retail businesses and complemented by new infill development of compatible scale and design on key opportunity sites. This critical mass of development hosts a mix of uses that inject vitality and activity into the area. The town center connects to the district's commercial corridors along Carroll Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Street, as well as adjacent residential neighborhoods, with safe and attractive streets and sidewalks, balancing the needs of pedestrians, transit and automobiles. Adequate parking is provided both on street and off-street to accommodate non-commuter transit users and commercial district patrons. In this vision, neighbors see an organized community of residents, property owners and merchants playing an active role in the upkeep and programming of the public space and maintenance of the overall district.

## Revitalization Goals

Early in the planning process, the vision for a revitalized Takoma Central District was further defined and presented to citizens as eight goals intended to guide planning activities and direct future redevelopment:

- 1. Preserve and enhance Takoma's small town/village character.**  
The existing architectural character and scale makes Takoma DC and surrounding neighborhoods unique. An additional strength is



U Street, Washington, DC



Park Avenue, Winter Park, FL



Mixed-use environment simulation



Village scale, Mashpee Commons, Massachusetts

the strong multi-cultural and ethnic base in the area, which should also be reflected in new development.

**2. Promote mixed-use development in existing commercial areas.**

A mixed-use plan for new development, including adding more housing at key opportunity sites, will support existing commercial uses and assist in creating a vital, pedestrian oriented environment in and around this important transit area.

**3. Encourage a neighborhood scale for new development.**

New commercial and residential development should be neighborhood-driven in scale and approach. New residential and commercial buildings should be no more than 2-4 stories in height to match existing neighborhood scale.

**4. Make major pedestrian corridors pedestrian-friendly.**

Improving the quality of the streetscape and repairing/upgrading building facades along important pedestrian corridors are significant steps needed to improve the image of Takoma and enhance the experience and safety of walking.

**5. Enhance and increase small businesses and community services that support the needs of the community.**

Provide quality local services for residents, as opposed to "undesirable" retail, such as liquor stores and bars, or regional destination-based retail. Commercial uses should be concentrated and continuous along existing, viable commercial corridors.

**6. Conserve existing resources and remove blight.**

Preserve and rehabilitate existing structures where possible, replacing particularly blighted buildings with new uses. Vacant and deteriorated buildings have an immense negative impact on the whole area and are a disincentive for redevelopment and investment.

**7. Leverage public and private sector opportunities.**

Coordinate neighborhood groups and business organizations in a focused partnership to take advantage of current economic health and marshal community, business and public sector resources to promote revitalization.

**8. Cross-jurisdictional planning.**

Improve the coordination of housing, commercial, transportation and streetscape programs and other planning issues broadly and across jurisdictional boundaries for the improvement and benefit of all surrounding DC and Maryland neighborhoods.